

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4802

Civility and Comity in the House of Representatives

February 14, 2005

Dear Colleague,

As we begin the work of the 109th Congress, I would like to share the following passage from a Dear Colleague letter sent by Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier in July of 2003:

"Character. Decency. Virtue. Respect. These words speak not of legislative mastery alone, but of that foundation of mutual respect and civility without which the House cannot do the people's work. Collegiality is not simply common politeness. Collegiality is the formal, consistent, public recognition of the rights to which each House member is entitled "by virtue of being a representative of the people". It is also reflected in the obligation of the majority to recognize the rights of the minority and in the obligation of the minority to participate in the act of governance in the role of loyal opposition."

These words still ring true as we embark on a new Congress. Debating and resolving new and old issues alike, we must remember these words and the importance of civility in the House of Representatives.

Far too many times during my service, the debate on the floor of the House has been reduced to impolite personal attacks from both sides of the aisle. It is inevitable that each of us will take a strong stand on certain issues that are close to our hearts and to the hearts of our constituents, but it is imperative that we maintain the decorum of the office of a Member of Congress.

Treating a fellow Member with respect is treating the institution with respect. To treat others, especially those with an opposing opinion, in a civil manner is not only a function of courtesy and respect, it is a foundation, and a requisite, of true debate. We must be able to successfully address differences in ideas and perspectives without resorting to trivial attacks on each other. If members are concentrating on each other's personalities, how can the House concentrate on its real business?

If, during the heat of debate, we allow ourselves to reduce our conduct to vitriolic personal attacks, we are failing those who have elected us to represent them. It is difficult to

reach the core problems of an issue and work out a solution if the debate is shrouded in snide comments and sophomoric rhetorical jabs. We must work out our differences in a manner fitting of the Congress so that we can properly address the issues facing our nation.

It is for all of these important reasons that I, in partnership with Chairman Dreier, am spearheading a Task Force on the Congress as an Institution through the Committee on Rules for the 109th Congress. The Task Force will provide a non-partisan forum for Members of both parties to discuss issues involving the institution and its deliberative processes. Issues that we may consider include maintaining civility, taking a further look at continuity, and considering how to improve relations with the other body over how we might resolve our legislative differences. It is my hope that with the establishment of this Task Force, we will be able to examine how we, as the elected representatives of the American people, can continue to serve with an increasing level of dignity and respect for each other and for the institution.

I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the aisle on this vitally important issue for the People's House. Let's lay a concrete foundation for an ongoing effort to maintain the safety, civility, and comity of the House.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shelley", written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shelley Moore Capito, M.C.